

Tracking identities: an anthropological perspective

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During the past decade, a number of dramatic events, such as terrorist attacks, fundamentalist wars, the growth of economic migrants and political refugees fleeing violence and instability, and the accelerated flow of people in a global economy have brought to the fore the challenge of developing methods to track identities within and across countries. Strategies for verifying identities and monitoring the movement of persons and groups have grown in number and technological sophistication. As a DRCLAS visiting scholar, I propose to study the matter of identities from a comparative perspective through a contextual analysis of American, Brazilian, and Indian case studies.

As an anthropologist, my interest has been directed to the multiple ways by which personhood is manifested in situations involving ID cards and ID numbers in the modern world. Over the past decades, I have published five papers exploring how attempts to monitor personal identities affect principles of citizenship, privacy, security, and human rights. Centering on events that have become the focus of public attention and debate, three of those papers are related to experiences in Brazil, and two to public events in the United States. India will provide a third case. In all of these, I am interested in the daily processes by which state norms are implemented, defended and contested, and by which "identity" -- in a broader sense -- is negotiated, performed, and experienced. Special attention is given to the official conventions of identification as they interact with other cultural practices of classifying personal identity, such as "recognition" and "profiling." On a theoretical level, I am interested in following the long-established anthropological wisdom of transcending specious opposition, such as the pseudo-historical chasm between old

and new, or dichotomies that freeze institutional structures and eliminate individual agency.

The five papers written thus far span decades of intermittent study; in the process, larger comparative issues and questions have gained clarity. I would like to use the resources of DRCLAS to rethink and rework these studies as well as to research and write additional ones. The result will be a manuscript for a short book, tentatively titled *Tracking Identities: an anthropological perspective*, in which the challenge and complexities of personal identities are examined in concrete ethnographic settings within a comparative frame.

A summary of the five existing papers will suggest the themes to be explored:

1. "Sem lenço, sem documento:" reflections on citizenship in Brazil" (1986) resulted from fieldwork in non-metropolitan regions in Brazil regarding the possible reaction to the debureaucratization program launched in the 1980s by the central administration. Though praised in the major urban centers, the program was seen as pointless by the rural population, who were alien to many of the identification papers used in large cities. Other than the voter's permit -- in the case of that provided to a farm employee by his/her employer -- debureaucratization made no sense. In such small places, which could be characterized as "pre-bureaucratic," people were known to each other as a face-to-face community. Thus "recognition," and not "identification," was the major instrument for socially situating a person, together with the family name and place of origin. A warning against easy top-down policies, which oftentimes make no sense to the target population, is put forward, as well as a call to take into account the different concepts of "citizenship" in use.

Available at:

http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/artigos/sem_lenco_sem_documento.htm

2. "These horrible times of papers': documents and national values" (2002) expanded the previous research to include the variety of documents used in Brazil, by means of multiple, revealing ethnographic cases. The paper highlights the central place of iconicity and indexicality (based on Charles Peirce's ideas) in the processes of identification, and the mechanisms by which, performatively, identity is "created" by means of ID cards. However, because they are logically simple and transparent, specially avoiding the need for human checking, numbers could be ideal for the simplification that nation-states pursue. A discussion about the inevitable combination between

a "logic of causality" (by the state) and a "logic of participation" (by individuals) is put forward to link different spheres of social action.

http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/artigos/2002_this_horrible_time_of_papers.htm

3. "The paradox of IDs: an experience in the United States" (2009) takes up the challenge of examining American identification processes from a double perspective: on the one hand, the idea of data centralization by the State is rejected in the name of protecting civil liberties; on the other, the trust in the power of numbers makes the SSN a central instrument of identification -- even if it should be protected from foreign eyes, kept in secret, and be constantly under surveillance not to make them public. The paper takes as its main ethnographic event the resignation of Eliot Spitzer, the New York state governor, whose mandate lasted from January 2007 to March 2008, and the role of IDs in the case in question. This governor, who wanted to provide driver's licenses to illegals, was later caught in an ID trap. Recognition and identification are again put side by side, and a focus on the paradox of *identity theft*, of which there is an average of 10 million victims every year in the US, closes the paper by discussing the advantages and difficulties in using numbers as identifiers.

http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/artigos/the_paradox_of_ids_serie_antropologia.html

4. "Your ID, please?" (2011) takes as its central event the arrest of Professor Gates by the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts police, after a 911 call from a passer-by who reported that someone was breaking into a house. It was soon discovered that it was Gates' own home, an incident that commanded national attention. The paper examines in a greater depth the difference between "recognition" and "identification," to which "profiling" is added, arguing that the three (Peircean) mechanisms are always present in combination. In this episode, Professor Gates' self-identification is compared to Sergeant James Crowley's demands for formal identification. I suggest how modern technologies necessarily live side by side with old means of identification.

http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/artigos/your_id_please.htm

5. "Etnografia não é método" [Ethnography is not a method] (2014) takes as its central event the mandatory electoral biometric reregistration presently in force in Brazil, and which, as recently announced, will eventually constitute the database for a new, single national ID number. Using my own experience of being requested to certify the previous Superior Electoral Court data, and adding new information (including a photo which the voter

does not see), I draw attention to the virtues of ethnography as a dialogue between anthropological theory and the new events the researcher confronts as if they were "ethnographic surprises". The formulation of a program to look at IDs' performative outcomes, as located in the interstices between formal politics and apparently simple administrative measures, is put forward at the end.

http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/artigos/2014_etnografia_ao_e_metodo.html

In addition to reworking these existing papers into an integrated argument, I plan to write two additional new chapters. The first is an introduction to the book, which will set out how I view anthropology's distinctive contribution to the debate on IDs, in the context of the current literature on the subject. A second paper will be an analysis of two ongoing large scale programs for identification by numbers and biometry: first, the Brazilian case, an initiative devised by the Superior Electoral Court, still under discussion to be approved by the National Congress; second, the current UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) program, its difficulties and paradoxes. The comparison of both cases will illuminate how these programs are conceptualized in different cultural contexts. Having attended the conference "21st Century Identification Systems," held in November last year at Harvard University by the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, I had an excellent opportunity to learn first hand about different experiences in many parts of the world. I believe an active dialogue with the Center would be fruitful to juxtapose an ethnographic approach to a more policy-oriented project to improve services for people to claim their basic entitlements.

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